

Book review: Robinson, B. G. (2018). The Killing Season: a History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66

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Book Review: Robinson, B. G. (2018). *The Killing Season. A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66.*

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More than half a century after the bloody eradication of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI), irrational fears of alleged communists still haunt the archipelago. In recent years, a coalition of the military and conservative Muslim groups has increased its efforts to keep these imagined enemies alive in order to discredit any endeavors to come to terms with the past. While there have been previous efforts by civil society organizations and even by the National Commission of Human Rights to seek the truth, recent years have seen a setback for reconciliation. Narratives originating from the Suharto era have been revitalized to depict the PKI as a latent threat to the nation.

In this political context, it is a pleasant fact that the academic debate continues. Geoffrey B. Robinson, professor at the Department of History at the University of California in Los Angeles and expert in the study of genocide and human rights as well as in modern Indonesian history, has recently contributed to this debate with his book *The Killing Season. A History of the Massacres, 1965-66*. After providing a brief overview of the history of the mass killings and the preliminary events, the author critically discusses patterns of explanation in academic and non-academic discourse in the first chapter. In doing so, Robinson stresses the importance of cultural, psychological, and socio-economic factors for the killings. However, the author also points out the shortcoming of these approaches. Cultural approaches such as patterns of “running amok”, for instance, are criticized for being reductionist and unable to explain the program of mass arbitrary detention that lasted even after the killings had come to an end. Socio-economic explanations, to draw on another example, are said to be unable to explain why these tensions escalated to mass killings. Additionally, the international context is taken into account: While repudiating analyses that state that the mass killings were mainly a result of a conspiracy by foreign forces such as the MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) – a popular approach among leftist circles in Indonesia – Robinson nevertheless argues that “in the absence of support from powerful states and in a different international context, the army’s program of mass killings and incarceration would not have happened” (p. 22). The international context plays a considerable role throughout the book and Robinson dedicates Chapter 4 (Cold War) to the international circumstances and Chapter 7 (A Gleam of Light in Asia) to the role of foreign forces. He argues that Western states, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, played a crucial role and it can be shown that even long before the coup, Western forces sought to delegitimize Indonesia’s first

president Sukarno and the PKI by both supporting and encouraging anti-communist parties. Robinson shows that following the alleged coup of 30 September 1965, foreign forces have facilitated the violence against the PKI in economic, military, and logistic matters. Taking into account Cold War politics, he shows that Western powers contributed to the rewriting of the events and Indonesian history by the army. It is not just Cold War conditions that fueled tensions between communists and anti-communists in Indonesia. The split between the Soviet Union and China, and Sukarno's decision to ally with China, are, according to Robinson, the main reasons why the Soviet Union was reluctant to protect fellow communists in Indonesia. Additionally, the author points out that international institutions and networks within civil society concerned with human rights were still weak at that time. The killings therefore gained almost no attention on the international stage.

Historical conditions, as Robinson stresses, are also crucial to understand the developments in Indonesia after the alleged coup. In Chapter 2, the author provides an overview of these conditions and points out several of their features, namely the ideological split between communist and right-wing factions within the Indonesian Revolution, narratives depicting the PKI as hostile to the nation, militarism resulting from the process of state formation, the army's tradition of working together with civilian militia, and the historical precondition of mass mobilization and militancy within Indonesian politics prior to 1965.

The main part of the book, however, deals with the role of the Indonesian army. The author proves that the pattern of violence suggests a pivotal role for the army's leadership in provoking tensions between PKI and PKI-affiliated organizations on the one hand and religious and other right-wing forces on the other hand. Similar patterns can be found when it comes to the way in which mass killings, arrests, tortures, rapes, and other crimes in collaboration with paramilitaries and militias were facilitated and organized. This is illuminated in detail in Chapters 5, 6, and 8. Contrary to the hegemonic narrative in Indonesia that the violence was a rather spontaneous outbreak of *amok* of the people against the communists, and, unlike approaches stressing socio-economic conditions, Robinson instead focuses on the army's role which is an important contribution to the Indonesian debate.

Chapter 9 deals with the efforts of the New Order regime to stigmatize and control former prisoners and alleged communists. Finally, in Chapter 10, measures for reconciliation and truth seeking in post-Suharto Indonesia (with a focus on recent years) are discussed, as well as the successful efforts of the anti-communist coalition of politicians, military officials, religious authorities, and paramilitary groups. The final chapter of the book provides a conclusion and discusses the legacies of the killings.

It becomes clear throughout the book that the main lines of argumentation and the focus on the army, international contexts, and historical conditions are highly influenced by the author's academic background as he is an expert not only on genocides and mass violence in general but also on Indonesian history. Indeed, Robinson shows his profound expertise in his detailed explanations. I found Robinson's book a very interesting read, offering new insights especially when it comes to the military's role. A profound insight into the army's norms and patterns of behavior and perception (what Robinson terms "institutional culture"), and the repertoire of

violence inherent in that institutional culture can also help to explain more recent developments in Indonesian politics. These insights are most of all important for the Indonesian discussion, since a large part of the population still perceives the army as the nation's savior and a critical view of the army is discussed only in limited circles of leftist activists and among very few scholars. Therefore, an Indonesian translation of Robinson's work would be highly desirable.

From a political economic perspective, however, the minor discussion of socio-economic conditions could be criticized. It would be misleading to stress the role of the army or the international circumstances at the expense of socio-economic conditions, since the latter falls into a different category of claims. The category of socio-economic conditions might rather fit into what Robinson terms "historical condition". Here, the author discusses important components of a political perspective. He does so convincingly and in great detail, but rather in a manner of discussing ideologies, worldviews, and the army's self-conception according to its history. Adding more information about economic tensions, for instance, between peasants and plantation workers on the one hand and local aristocrats, Islamic institutions, and the military on the other, could enrich the analysis of the historical conditions leading to the mass killings and incarceration. Regarding the historical conditions, it could also be added that the split between communist and religious forces was not the only or even the main condition, at least at the beginning. Emerging from the struggle for independence, there were plenty of efforts to merge Islam and communism of which Sukarno's concept of NASAKOM (an acronym of *nasionalisme*, *agama* (religion) and *komunisme*) is only the most well-known (e.g., Cribb & Kahin, 2004, pp. 286-287).

In conclusion, Robinson's work is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the 1965 events that draws on a rich body of primary and secondary sources. The book is an easy read when it comes to language and an enlightening read when it comes to the details of army operation and strategies. It is a must-read for Indonesianists, and many parts of the book might also draw the attention of people dedicated to genocide and military studies in general.

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